

Notes of the Tenant Panel Meeting

Held on 14 October 2021 at 10.00 am held virtually

Attendance – Tenant Panel Facilitator, Governance Coordinator, Director of Customer and Communities, Frances, Sandy, Charlotte, Charmaine, David, Anne and Roger.

Apologies – Charlie

Declarations of Interest – There were none.

Work Programme and Review of Group Contract – This was noted.

	Item
1	To Approve September notes, to note the Matters Arising Report
	<p>The notes were approved, and the Matters Arising report noted.</p> <p>Following a query the Director of Customer and Communities shared that the annual placeshaping activities report to the Board would be shared with the Panel at the next meeting and that rural provision would also be covered in discussions.</p> <p>The Director of Customer and Communities shared that subject to space on the November Tenant Panel meeting agenda the Support Manager would attend to provide an update the scheme improvement project.</p> <p>The Governance Coordinator advised that she would be communicating with the Board Members and the Chair who were due to attend the November meeting in preparation of their slots. The Chair would provide a view of the past year and year going forward. The Board Member and new Board Member Donald McKenzie would attend to provide an update since the November Board meeting and quarterly Tenant Panel update report response. The Governance Coordinator agreed to forward a comment to the Chair to include what ideas he and the Board had for the future.</p> <p>The Governance Coordinator agreed to ask the Director of Asset Management to address a query in regard to whether new builds had any damp and mould issues.</p>
2	Annual Rent and Service Charge Report - Presentation
	<p>The Tenant Panel discussed the forthcoming report to Board in November regarding the Annual Rent and Service Charge review, and the key affordability concerns that effect the decision. The Director of Customer and Communities presented the item.</p> <p>The Director of Customer and Communities advised that she wished to seek feedback from the Tenant Panel to help to form the report to Board.</p> <p>The Tenant Panel had the following queries and made the following comments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A Panel Member felt that the average service charge fee was a lot of money but they noted that there was no profit made. The Director of Customer and Communities agreed to bring back to the January meeting discussion on the Grounds Maintenance Contract as it was due for renewal. The Governance Coordinator agreed to add to the work programme.

- Following a query the Director of Customer and Communities explained that Freebridge had received some funding to make some homes more energy efficient which would help with rising energy costs, and currently they were identifying homes which were eligible for such measures as replacement of ineffective heating and installation of new cavity wall insulation.
- A Tenant Panel Member commented in regard to the nationally available hardship funds such as the Warm Home Discount and had found it quite confusing to apply with such a short window of opportunity, they questioned what Freebridge were doing to advertise this process and remind tenants it was available. The Director of Customer and Communities shared that there was information on the Freebridge website and it was more important than ever that tenants had information of what was available. She added that Freebridge were currently drafting a communications plan to share this information with customers.
- A Panel Member commented that where a pension increase was received it would be lost through the rent increase and so there would be no gain for the individual.
- A Panel member queried in regard to the average service charge amount and felt on a monthly basis it was potentially a large amount for some people to find. The Director of Customer and Communities shared that the Board needed to consider the continuing roll out. A Panel Member was concerned that in absorbing the service charge there may not be money for other things that Freebridge wishes to do and they felt that the cost was minimal to keep the surroundings nice.
- A Panel Member commented that they had paid a full service charge over the past 11 years, and their neighbours had paid increments in the last few years. If they want a good grounds maintenance service and cleaning service, (where standards are higher than in the past), they have to expect to pay for it. But they acknowledged it may be difficult for some people to afford, but their benefits will go up.
- A Panel member commented that they regularly report jobs that are not being done in their sheltered scheme, but they wished to highlight that there was a reason why some tenants do not report issues – because they are worried that this will then in turn increase their service charge.
- A Panel Member commented that they are aware that when for example a cleaning company tender for a contract they know the right wording to get the contract but when they get it they don't then do it. The Panel Member felt there was never enough monitoring of contractors and what tenants report don't always get done. The Director of Customer and Communities shared that in future contracts digital means of monitoring contractor performance would be considered. A Panel Member agreed that if you want services you have to pay for them, but if the services are not received properly it needs to be sorted by Freebridge.

The Director of Customer and Communities shared that the Tenancy Sustainment plan was there to support customers but if there were any further preventative ideas any Panel member might have that would be welcomed.

The Director of Customer and Communities shared that across the business it was a key point that we need to demonstrate value for money in the services that we procure especially if we are charging service charges and that would be conveyed to the Board.

In answer to what help Freebridge can provide to tenants particularly over the winter, a Panel Member shared that the additional support seems fantastic but was concerned any rent increase may not cover what is needed. The Director of Customer and Communities

shared in regard to their comment about rent being a high enough increase to cover costs, they explained that Freebridge could go no higher than the prescribed cap.

A Panel member commented that increases in costs was a theme across the country at this time and everything was increasing in cost, so if Freebridge wished to achieve a particular standard and help to support tenants in need it needed the money to do this and it was not right that this should have to be borrowed entirely.

The Director of Customer and Communities shared that if the Panel had any further queries to email her but the report would go to Board for their consideration at their next meeting in November and then any change in the rent and service charge amounts would apply from April 2022 next year.

3 Repairs Task and Finish Group

The Tenant Panel discussed the report tabled at the recent Repairs Task and Finish Group meeting, and received an update from Tenant Panel Member Anne on her attendance at the group meeting in the capacity as observer.

Anne felt that it was interesting to observe how the Board deal with issues when things are not going so well such as the back log of repairs. Anne shared that they discussed recruitment of operatives, doors and window installations, appointment times, root causes of repairs issues and repairs being fixed first time right. She shared that a specialist team would take calls going forward when a tenant reports a repair. She further shared that the Board Members had been keen for the Tenant Panel Members to be involved with the process of monitoring the improvements to the repairs service over the coming months.

The Panel Made the following comments:

- A Panel Member commented that Freebridge should tell tenants what the issues are and make a plan to systematically resolve it.
- A Panel Member commented that if a contractor did unsatisfactory work to a property they would be unsure why Freebridge would want them to do further work on any home even if it was to resolve issues.
- A Panel Member felt that work given to contractors was not always followed up for quality monitoring after.
- A Panel Member commented that other than surveys to tenants they could see why the Board would want comments from the Tenant Panel as this kind of feedback is not sourced elsewhere. They wished to congratulate the Director of Customer and Communities on the report, which was very honest. They noted the survey was not yet finished so until this was finished they could see how Freebridge could not yet formulate a plan. The replacement of windows and doors was a huge and costly issue that was a concern.
- A Panel Member wished to comment that the conversation was very interesting and if management were not doing their job then it needs to be addressed.

The Panel felt unanimously that a Panel Member should attend the Repairs Task and Finish Group going forward at least in an observational capacity as it provided an opportunity to listen, seek assurance and share back to the wider Panel. The Governance Coordinator agreed to forward onto the team and ask that feedback be provided at the November Tenant Panel Meeting.

	<p>A Panel Member thanked the other members for attending the other events and it was appreciated the information had been shared.</p> <p>Anne shared that she would like to follow up at the next Repairs Task and Finish Group meeting in January even if that was only to observe. She added that she was impressed by Board Members Vicky Savage and Gill Rejzl in the meeting as they provided good challenge to staff.</p>
4	Housing Ombudsman Residents Panel Update
	<p>The Tenant Panel received an update from Tenant Panel Member Anne on her involvement with the residents panel in recent weeks. Anne shared that since the last report to the Panel she had circulated in July there had no meeting she was invited to attend. She added that the Ombudsman had a Customer Charter which they were currently consulting tenants on and Anne had compiled a report for circulation to Panel members. The next meeting was in January 2022 but as there were 600 members it was unclear whether Anne would be chosen to attend on that occasion. It was noted that was information on the ombudsman website.</p>
5	Meeting with the Regulator 11th October 2021
	<p>An update was received from Tenant Panel Members who attended the meeting in Norwich with the Regulator. Members had an opportunity to raise any questions regarding the briefing note relating to the Regulator's Annual Consumer Regulation Review, as circulated in the agenda pack.</p> <p>Charmaine shared that the meeting began with discussions around the table and a survey in regard to what the big issues were for tenants. The purpose was to gather information into a priorities list but key themes had been around communications, repairs and antisocial behaviour.</p> <p>The legislation was not set to come into force for another year but a lot of the associations were looking to act now rather than wait. The new Director of Consumer Standards Kate Dodds was present at the event and they would be continuing conversations on the consumer standard regulation and consultation with tenants.</p> <p>Charmaine found that in attending the event it assured her that the new regulation would be put into place sooner than later. She added that she would attend future events, and found it very helpful to have those conversations to see commonality across the housing sector. She added that it had helped to find their voice and felt it had been heard. Charmaine wished thank other Panel members and the Governance Coordinator to support them as this was the first face to face meeting with others in a long time. The Tenant Panel Facilitator and Panel Member thanked Charmaine for her feedback.</p> <p>Anne also had attended and commented that she had found it very interesting that surveys had discovered that a common three areas of repairs, communication and anti social behaviour were key themes at most associations that tenants wished to be dealt with.</p>
6	Customer Charter
	<p>Following on from the September meeting, a further roundtable discussion was held regarding key considerations for the Charter and shared the current charter document and the key themes within it. The Director of Customer and Communities shared some</p>

background where the Tenant Panel had provided some great feedback. The survey on the charter was still available for tenants to complete. Various customer feedback methods totalling over 1000 had been used to formulate the Customer Charter. It was hoped that the Charter was easy to read and accessible as possible.

The Panel had the following comments and responses were given:

- Hard copies would be available for those who need it as well as being available online.
- Need to make sure there is no duplication across the Customer Charter.
- Suggestion of a list of who to contact for example winter warm payments. The Director of Customer and Communities shared that the document would be updated annually and would signpost tenants to services that Freebridge offer and any that outside services offer such as the government and partner organisations.
- Suggestion to make it clear what parts are Freebridge and what are statutory.
- Inclusion of the Freebridge Values and what Freebridge is all about perhaps in the opening part of the document.
- Include operationally where responsibilities lie.
- Expand on accessibility to include support to vulnerable and other groups of tenants.

The Director of Customer and Communities shared that it makes Freebridge accountable and agreed that it could be a section in its self, and also over time the Charter will become more and more customer led.

The Director of Customer and Communities shared that all issues have equal value but if a Panel member had to prioritise one thing from what is suggested what would be most important?

- Communication – you do what you say you are going to do with transparency. Being heard
- Security – feeling safe.
- Quality of the Housing and Repairs. A lot of areas to go into the document but there may be a lot of things that are out of Freebridge's control, such as when the general public are concerned.
- Sections on domestic abuse etc. they may need that information now and will need to think how you formulate this section.
- As an existing tenant it would be around communication and repairs. Some of the different groups could be put together, asb and safety for example.
- An existing tenant may wish to see something different however at the top to a current tenant.
- Communication should be at the top of the charter.

The Director of Customer and Communities shared that we need to make sure that it is a document that prospective tenants could also receive so there is consistency on communication and repairs. She shared when further drafted she would bring back to the Tenant Panel with more detail, for further comments. The Governance Coordinator agreed to note on the future work programme.

Draft Quarterly Report to the Board (Quarter 2 – July - Sept)

	<p>The Tenant Panel considered their draft report to the Board for quarter 2 and included the following key messages:</p> <p>The Tenant Panel wished to seek the views of the Board on the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tenant Engagement – The Panel would like to know from the Board what the policy is in terms of Freebridge and Tenant Panel members doing more to go out to tenants in terms of engagement. For example doing more Out and Abouts. The Tenant Panel recognises that the current telephone survey is a big piece of work that Freebridge is doing. • Repairs and capacity to do the work - The Panel would like to know from the Board what the policy is in terms of significantly increasing the capacity of Freebridge to undertake repairs. For example are they planning a significant recruitment drive. • Tenant Panel Involvement – The Tenant Panel were really impressed with the feedback by a Tenant Panel member who had observed the Repairs Task and Finish Group. The Panel wish to know what other committees exist and what opportunities are there for them to observe other Committees at work and report back to their fellow Tenant Panel members.
8	Any Other Business
	There was none.
9	<p>What did we do well – Feedback from the Meeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good today, like the presentation on the annual rent and service charging report. We know that rent will only ever go up. Look forward to the next meeting. • Been informative interesting and eye opening. • Very interesting and the Customer Charter is a very good piece of work. • Easy to understand, exciting and understood what had been discussed. Moved a lot of issues forward. • If it wasn't a good meeting, would wonder what had gone wrong. • The Director of Customer and Communities had been very much present in most the meetings that she had attended with the Tenant Panel and could not think over the past few years that anyone had attended the Panel meetings in this capacity before. She has been very open and wants to hear the Panel's opinions and giving the Panel feedback at every stage of a project.
10	Date of Next Meeting
	<p>Thursday 18 November 2021, 9.45 am – 1.45 pm, via Zoom. Meeting Closed at 1.55 pm</p>